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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 002471

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SMIG](#) [GT](#)
SUBJECT: ILLEGAL ALIEN DETENTIONS IN THE U.S. REVIVE
CRITICISM THAT THE BERGER ADMINISTRATION ISN'T PROTECTING
IMMIGRANTS

Classified By: Ambassador James Derham, Reason: 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The December 12 raids of Swift meatpacking plants in the U.S. that resulted in the reported detentions of some 500 Guatemalans have generated a media storm. Critics of the Berger Government have renewed charges that the GOG does not do enough to protect undocumented Guatemalans living and working in the US. The detentions came only 24 hours after Foreign Minister Rosenthal met with Secretary Rice and other officials, purportedly to focus on

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immigration issues. On December 17, Guatemalan Catholic Cardinal Quezada joined the chorus of criticism, accusing the U.S. of being inconsistent on immigration after the local media erroneously reported that US officials had made commitments to Foreign Minister Rosenthal ensuring better treatment for Guatemalan immigrants. Having permitted misleading accounts of the Washington meetings to develop in the media, the GOG was embarrassed by the Swift raids and dug the hole deeper by suggesting that the U.S. was engaged in a "double game." In a December 18 meeting with the Ambassador and DCM, FM Rosenthal apologized for press mischaracterizations of his meeting with Secretary Rice, but added that growing domestic pressure for the Berger government to defend its migrants would lead to more official statements of indignation over the results of the Swift roundup. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Guatemalan media was quick to condemn the December 12 ICE raids on Swift meat-packing plants in six US states and brought attention to the coincidence of these operations occurring shortly after the Guatemalan Foreign Minister's meeting with Secretary Rice. Leading daily "Prensa Libre" had reported on December 12 that in her meeting with Foreign Minister Rosenthal, Secretary Rice had made a commitment to review the status of "4,000" Guatemalans whose asylum petitions (dating from the 1980,s) had been denied, and implied that Rosenthal had secured an agreement from American officials for unspecified better treatment of Guatemalan immigrants in the US. The Guatemalan Foreign Ministry, the source of these reports, did nothing to clarify what actually had been discussed in Washington but rather added to the comments that the ICE operation undercut the commitments made in the December 11 meeting. Vice President Stein, for example, told the press December 15 that the raids demonstrated a "disconnect in the political understanding" between the White House and the State Department.

¶3. (SBU) During a December 17 sermon, Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada characterized the situation of Guatemalan immigrants as "horrible," and accused the U.S. Government of having an inconsistent immigration agenda of using diplomatic channels to promise to resolve the situation of Guatemalan immigrants

while at the same time executing immigration laws with opposing goals. Local media reports on the Guatemalan immigrants in the wake of the Swift raids emphasized fear and terror among the Guatemalan immigrant community and have highlighted reported cases of children being left in the care of relatives after the detention of parents.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador and DCM met with Foreign Minister Rosenthal and Vice Minister Altolaquirre at their request on December 18 to discuss handling the media in the wake of the Swift arrests. Rosenthal was clearly pained by what he termed a "misrepresentation" by the press of his discussions in Washington that implied he had secured a positive change in the status of at least some Guatemalan immigrants. He noted how the GOG was frustrated over reports from Guatemalan immigrants suggesting that those who registered for NACARA benefits many years ago are now being called in by ICE for possible deportation. He said there is a generalized fear among Guatemalan immigrants in the U.S. that deportations are increasing. The Ambassador noted that the number of Guatemalans deported in 2006 is less than a quarter of one percent of all Guatemalans living illegally in the US, and that this hardly represents a threat to the vast majority of Guatemalans living out of status in the U.S. The Ambassador noted, and Foreign Minister Rosenthal agreed, that comprehensive immigration reform remains the best vehicle for advancing our shared goals on the immigration issue and that all of our actions and statements need to be designed to support this goal. Rosenthal said he expects the immigration issue to remain front page news in Guatemala for the next few days, and said that Guatemalan Ambassador in Washington Guillermo Castillo would be returning to Guatemala to participate in a December 21 press conference with the Foreign Minister that will focus on what the GOG is doing to defend its migrants to the United States. He implied that for public consumption he will express indignation over the Swift raids.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Immigration is an emotional subject in Guatemala and one that has exposed President Berger to significant criticism. Guatemalan immigrant community leaders repeatedly tell the press that the Presidents of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua have consistently gotten better deals from the US for their immigrants. The Berger Administration is especially sensitive to these criticisms given that the upcoming presidential election in September 2007 positions immigration as a domestic political issue. Rosenthal's December 11 trip to Washington was designed to show Guatemalans that the Berger Government is engaged in their defense, and the unfortunate timing of the Swift raids has undermined the Berger Government's credibility on this issue. Rosenthal and many in the GOG understand that the enactment of comprehensive immigration reform is the best hope for advancing Guatemala's immigration agenda in the US, but the uncertain and long-term nature of this process has led many here, certainly in the media and the church, to voice their doubts.

Derham